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HOPI SNAKE WASHING

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New studies of Hopi Snake Dances have revealed the fact that no two of the five celebrations of this dance are identical in details. Some of these variations have already been pointed out¹ in an account of the dances at Oraibi and the pueblos of the Middle Mesa, and there are other differences which will be considered in an exhaustive account of the Hopi Snake Dance which I have in preparation.

One of the most significant variations in the component rites of the Snake Dance ceremonials, in different Hopi pueblos, is the absence of altars in the *kivas* of the Snake Societies of every pueblo except Walpi. This absence has necessarily modified secret rites, especially that weird ceremony, the washing of reptiles, which is celebrated at noon on the ninth day. As the details of Snake washing in a *kiva* where there is no altar have never been described, and as the Micoñinovi variant is probably typical of these ceremonials in four pueblos, I have thought it well to put on record a few notes on this rite as observed in 1897.

The Snake washing at Walpi was first witnessed by me in 1891. Before that year no one except Indian members of the Snake Society had been allowed to remain in the *kiva* during this event. The late A. M. Stephen had an intimation of the existence of Snake washing rites, but repeated attempts to remain in the *kiva* to witness them had been met with a firm refusal. Some time before the Walpi Snake dance in 1891, Mr A. M. Stephen, Mr T. V. Keam, and myself tried in various ways to induce the Snake Chief, Kopeli, to allow us to see the Snake washing. We found Kopeli willing to admit us, but some of the older and more conservative priests strongly objected. It was evident that only one white man could be admitted, and there were doubts, up to the opening of the ceremony, whether even that one would be allowed to remain throughout the whole event. The Indians at last decided that I should be permitted to witness the rite, and that the late J. G. Owens should serve as tyler at the *kiva* hatch, and see what he could from that place.

¹ 16th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

In 1893, the next performance, both Mr Stephen and myself witnessed the Snake washing at Walpi, and the notes made in these presentations were published in 1894 in the form of a memoir on the Walpi Snake Dance.¹

In 1895, the author was the only white spectator of the Walpi Snake washing, and in 1897 he was accompanied by Professor G. Wharton James, with whom he also witnessed the ceremony at Micoñinovi, which is here described.²

The first event directly connected with the Snake washing at Micoñinovi was the entrance of a man with a bag full of sand, which he had gathered in the valley. This sand he spread on the floor south of the fireplace, covering a rectangular area, one side of which was bounded by the *kiva* wall. Seats were arranged on the other three sides for the men who were to participate in the rite.

It is customary at the Middle Mesa to keep the captured reptiles in the *kiva* in four large earthen amphoræ or canteens, similar to those in which women carry water from the springs to the pueblos. In preparation for the Snake washing, the reptiles were removed from these receptacles before the songs began. This removal took place very quietly, and while it was taking place several of the men walked about the room, while others prepared their paraphernalia for the public dance, which took place at sundown of the same day. The men in the *kiva* were naked, as they generally are in ceremonial work, and their bodies were painted red with an iron oxide. All had a little feather, stained red, in their hair. Some of the more experienced priests smiled at the difficulty which the novices had in getting the reptiles to emerge from the mouth of the canteen. The occupants of the *kiva* did not hesitate to speak aloud, which is *taboo* at Walpi, and their faces had not the solemn look characteristic of East Mesa priests during similar rites.

The reptiles were driven out of the canteens by being prodded with a snake whip inserted through a hole in the side, and as soon as a snake protuded its head from the mouth of the vessel he was seized by the neck and transferred to a cloth bag. While

¹ Snake Ceremonials at Walpi. Jour. Amer. Eth. and Arch., vol. iv, pp. 81-87.

² This preliminary note will be supplemented by an account, with illustrations, which will be later published in a report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, under the auspices of which institution these studies were made.

the reptiles were being removed from the vessels a small boy, about ten years old, began to cry.¹ His father or some relative comforted the frightened lad, but there were a few harsh words of disapproval from other men present.

Finally, at about noon, after patient waiting on our part, the Snake priests took their seats around the sanded floor, sitting so closely together that their naked bodies touched each other, forming a human corral.

The Snake chief seated himself about the middle of the line of men on the longest side of the sanded area, and one or two older men, with rattles, took places at either side. The remainder of the Snake men sat around the sand closely crowded together, holding their snake whips, with which to beat time to the songs.

After all the priests were seated, except a few in charge of the bag of snakes and two or three lads who stood in the middle of the *kiva* back of the line of seated men, the Snake chief made symbols of sacred meal on a hillock of sand before him. Upon this hillock he then deposited a large earthen wash-bowl, such as is used in bathing the head, and then poured liquid into this bowl from the north, west, south, and east sides, following a sinistral ceremonial circuit. Pinches of sacred meal were then dropped into the liquid, first on the north side, then on the west, south, and east, adding two more, one for the above and another for the below. The chief then took from his mouth a fragment of chewed root and dropped it also into the bowl. All remained silent during these acts, and soon a lighted pipe was passed from one to another of the priests, beginning with the chief, who puffed great clouds of tobacco smoke into the liquid and to the cardinal points in the prescribed circuit.

Individual prayers followed the ceremonial smoke. These began with the Snake chief, and were taken up in turn by the other members of the society. The prayers were immediately followed by songs, accompanied by the rattles to secure rhythm and while these songs were sung the reptiles were washed. The Snake men held their snake whips erect, on a level with the shoulder, keeping time to the rhythm of the songs.

Soon after the priests began to sing I noticed that the men

¹ One of my informants said the lad was bitten by a snake.

with the bag of reptiles handed the snakes to the chief and his neighbors, and that they plunged the reptiles into the bowl before them, later depositing the snakes on the sand covering the floor. While this transpired the singers kept on with their songs, and other snakes were handed to the chief, who plunged them into the liquid and placed them on the sand. The floor enclosed by the row of sitting priests was soon covered with a mass of writhing reptiles, the rapidly moving species darting from one end to the other of the sanded area, the rattlers, which move in a more deliberate way, extending themselves at length or coiling for defense. Several of the whip snakes, crawling between the legs of the seated priests, escaped to the floor of the *kiva*, but were dextrously picked up and returned to the enclosure. Three or four snakes climbed up the side of the *kiva* wall and wound their bodies into a small niche, from which their heads protruded as if spectators of the curious ceremony. When the snakes huddled too closely together one of the priests separated them, using the end of his snake whip as a kind of pitchfork.

The songs closed with prayer and ceremonial smoke, and the priests returned to the preparation of their dance paraphernalia, leaving the reptiles on the floor, where they were herded by one or two of their number. Several white men came into the *kiva* after the washing to see this mass of reptiles on the sand, and Professor James obtained a good photograph of the snakes on the floor, a printed copy of which has been widely distributed. Subsequent rites with these snakes belong to another chapter in descriptions of the Snake Dance and do not now concern us.

It has been suggested that the liquid in which the reptiles are bathed is a stupefying compound into which they are introduced in order to render them more tractable when carried on the plaza a few hours after. I find no good evidence that such is the object of the washing, nor do I believe that any means are adopted to stupefy them.

The statement that the snakes are "washed repeatedly in various kinds of medicine water and are frequently handled or stroked with a downward squeezing movement of the hand" has not been verified by me. They are washed but once, and I have never seen them stroked, as the above quotation implies. No "course of treatment" is, so far as I know, adopted in the *kiva* by the Snake priests to render the rattlesnake innocuous. Some

of the larger rattlesnakes have been held up for my examination, and I have been invited to take them in my own hands, which invitation was not accepted, and the Indian who held them may, in commenting on their size, have stroked the body, but no systematic treatment by stroking or squeezing has been observed.

The Snake washing is simply a purification rite, analogous to the head washing of the priests on the same day, rather than treatment to stupefy or otherwise render the snakes harmless in subsequent handling. The treatment of the reptiles, venomous or otherwise, during the Snake ceremonials and the way they are addressed at capture justifies the belief that they are regarded as kin or members of the same family or clan as the priests. The legends of the society distinctly state that the children of the Snake woman became reptiles, and this same ancestress is regarded as the parent of the Snake family, out of which the Snake society has grown. In totemism, which is the key-note of the Snake ceremony, we find the explanation of this fancied kinship, for both human and reptilian beings are supposed to have a common ancestress, with characters of each.

It is but natural, following this line of thought, that when the reptiles are brought into the pueblo to participate with their human kindred in the great family ceremony their heads, no less than those of the priests, should be bathed as a preparation for the dance in which they participate. Early in the day the heads of novices are washed as a necessary preparation for the dance.

The portion of the Snake tradition which refers to the snake washing is as follows: "On the fifth evening of the ceremony and for three succeeding evenings low clouds trailed over Tokonabi, and Snake people from the underworld came from them and went into the kivas and ate only corn pollen for food, and on leaving were not seen again. Each of four evenings brought a new group of Snake people, and on the following morning they were found in the valleys metamorphosed into reptiles of all kinds."¹

On the *ninth* morning the *Tcüamana* (Snake maidens) said: "We understand this. Let the younger brothers [the Snake Society] go out and bring them all in and *wash their heads*, and

¹ Jour. Amer. Eth. and Arch., vol. iv, p. 116.

let them dance with you." Again, when the Snake maid gave birth to reptiles "their heads were washed, and they were dried in sand heaps on the floor, and their mothers sat beside them."

The Snake washing is one of many ceremonial acts by which the Hopi have perpetuated their ancient beliefs. Another way of preserving these beliefs is by means of the myth or legend, which is transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to another.

The Snake washing at Micoñinovi, and the same may probably be said of that at Oraibi, Cipaulovi, and Cuñopavi, is a tame affair as compared with that at Walpi, which has always seemed to me the most fearless episode of the Snake Dance. When the snakes are removed from the jars, at the last pueblo, the Snake men fearlessly plunge their hands into receptacles filled with reptiles, any one of which might strike them. This is done in a dimly lighted room, at a time when there is great excitement, with men yelling at the top of their voices. How the Snake men escape the poisonous fangs of the rattlesnakes is a wonder to me, and yet, although I have witnessed the Walpi Snake washing four times, I have never seen one of the men bitten. The snakes are carefully taken out of the receptacles at Micoñinovi before the rites begin. They are not thrown across the room on an altar, but are simply thrust into a bowl of liquid and placed on sand to dry.

The simplicity of the Snake washing at Micoñinovi as compared with that at Walpi is probably due to the absence of a snake altar and snake *tiponi* at the former pueblo. The fact that the rite is simpler in this and three other pueblos may indicate that the ancient rite was less complicated than that now observed at Walpi. On the other hand, it is possible that the simplicity of the Snake washing at the three pueblos of the Middle Mesa and Oraibi is due to the fact that the cult as there observed is an offshoot from a more complex form. A third possible explanation, that the simple celebrations are survivals, due to syn-copation, of more complicated rites, has less to commend it, for it seems hardly probable that they once had snake altars and *tiponis* which in course of time were lost.